

Luke 2:21-40 & 52
(Leviticus 12:6-8; Colossians 1:15-20)
“My Eyes Have Seen Your Salvation”

Introduction

The start of a new year is a natural time for us to make a fresh start at becoming the people we thought we'd be by now. For some of us, the challenge of a fresh start is exhilarating, for others it is exhausting. Some are accustomed to achievement and victory, others to failure and defeat. Some set goals and reach them; others set goals they know they will never reach; still others don't even bother to set goals anymore. But the older we get, the more truly we know that life is fleeting and that we only get one crack at it.

The great questions are always there just beneath the surface, just beyond the bend in the road. And it is life's pain, not its joy, that shatters our security and brings us face to face with the great questions, especially the question of God: Is he really there at all? If so, does he really care about what happens here, about what happens to me? Who makes a rose, only to see it crushed under foot? Who makes people in his own image only to see them suffer and die like beasts? How can we start again in hope when we know that life always leads to pain and death, to bidding farewell to those whom we love more than life itself?

The lesson of our text is that God has not stood back from us in cool detachment, merely observing our pain from afar. He has entered our predicament, taking upon himself the suffering and death that are the consequences of our rebellion against him.

We could, of course, focus this morning on the lovelier aspects of the story: We could focus on the beautiful obedience of Jesus' parents to the law of God. Though their son was the great, divine exception to the rest of humanity, they sought no exception in raising him, but did everything required by the law (2:39): they circumcised him on the eighth day and presented him the fortieth day (thirty-three days after his circumcision) for the sacrifice of purification for Mary and to be consecrated to the Lord as Mary's first-born son. Or, we could focus on how his heavenly Father showed his love in bearing witness through Simeon and Anna that the child was his promised Messiah who would be Savior of both Jews and Gentiles. He also gave warning to Mary that parenting, even of this perfect child – one might better say, *especially* of this perfect child – would involve heartache and pain: “and a sword will pierce through your own soul also” (2:35). And he enabled the child to grow in a normal way (2:40): Physically: “The child grew and became strong.” Mentally: He was “filled with wisdom.” And spiritually: “The favor of God was upon him.”

But instead, we will focus this morning on the fact that, from the very start, this would be a human life, and this covenant family – both the child and his parents – would share the same joys and sorrows, pleasure and suffering, that we all must share. Here, I think, is the glory of the gospel from the very start – let me repeat it again: God has not stood back from us in holy detachment, but has chosen to share with us the consequences of our rebellion against him.

Body

1. Note, first, the physical implications of the incarnation:

Our Experience: We have known great benefits from science and technology this century, not the least of which has been the incredible increase in physical health and in life expectancy. Yet, for some of us, the New Year will hold severe physical suffering. Some of you are battling cancer; others heart disease. In a congregation this size, likely some have AIDS or hepatitis c. Some will battle arthritis; others dementia, and still others will be in accidents and suffer broken bones.

Jesus' experience: The baby Jesus had barely recovered (do we ever fully recover?) from the pain and shock of being thrust, as all babies are thrust, through his mother's birth canal, out of the warm darkness into the freezing light, when the rabbi was summoned to cut off the baby's foreskin, painfully marking him a child of God's covenant people. He shared our pain from the start, and in the years to come would know hunger, thirst, the ache of exertion, the pain of being struck, cut and finally nailed to a wooden crossbeam.

But in taking our flesh, he would also know the joy of eating and drinking, of human touch, of rest at the end of a hard day. We must never deny his humanity in affirming his divinity. He took our flesh and all that goes with it, was (as the author of Hebrews puts it) "tempted in all ways as we are, yet without sinning," in order that he might break sin's destructive grip on our flesh and carry our flesh into the very presence of God.

Lessons: So, whenever we are tempted to think that God has abandoned us in our sickness or distress, that we are now put on a shelf, unable to experience real life, we need to remember the fragility of life and health, and that physical suffering is the shadow side of physical pleasure, the joy of being inspirited bodies. In a fallen world, broken not by God's spite but by our rebellion against his mercy, wisdom takes "the bitter with the sweet." And we are not alone: God's son experienced physical pain and even death so that we might know unending life with him.

2. Note, secondly, the social and economic implications of the incarnation:

Our Experience: In a climate of global political and economic uncertainty, in this always fragile life, some of us here this morning will suffer financial reversals that will completely alter our economic, and thus our social, situation. It may be through the loss of a job or the break up of a marriage. It may be through bad investments or over-indebtedness. It may be that the economy worsens and we experience another, perhaps far worse, recession that sinks our financial ships.

Jesus' Experience: Jesus also knew the pain of being at the bottom of the rung socially and economically. The sacrifice offered by his mother for her purification

was that prescribed only for the poor. Ordinarily, she was to bring a yearling lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or dove for a sin offering. But if she was too poor to afford a lamb, she could substitute another dove or pigeon (Leviticus 12:8).

Lessons: Whatever reversals we may suffer may prove to be our salvation, if they loosen our grip on things doomed to pass away, and tighten our grip on things that last. And we have the companionship of a Savior and Lord who has walked this path.

3. Note, thirdly, the relational implications of the incarnation:

Our Experience: The fragility of our culture seems most evident in the area of relationships. So many families broken to pieces, so many people moved by their jobs from one town to another, that it is hard to develop and nurture a sense of stability and community.

Even such relational brokenness can serve to remind us that "here we have no continuing city," and that our only lasting citizenship is in God's kingdom. And the very brokenness of our world and of the people all around us affords us the opportunity of showing the love of God to those who realize their need of it.

Jesus' Experience: With a growing awareness of his calling, there must have been a growing awareness of the pain he would bring to those who loved him most. After all, even as Simeon delighted Jesus' parents with his declaration that this little baby was God's Messiah, he warned Mary of the pain of being the Messiah's mother: "And a sword will pierce through your own soul also" (2:35).

We do not know at what point Jesus' growth "in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man" (2:52) yielded the knowledge that not only he, but his followers too, would suffer persecution and death. But we do know that early in his public ministry he pronounced a blessing on all who would suffer on account of him (Matthew 5:11). And we know that, before his enemies tortured him, his friends deserted him, and at his trial there was no one to speak in his defense.

If Scripture's most poignant description is its shortest verse, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35), expressing his pain at the death of a beloved friend, perhaps its most poignant cries are, "Do you want to go away, as well?" (John 6:67), expressing Jesus' pain at the desertion of many of his followers, and "My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34), expressing his final agonized sense of separation from his Father as he became sin for us.

Yet, he also knew the love of one who would answer, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). He knew the love that would motivate Mary's lavish giving of her most prized possession: an alabaster jar of perfume worth a year's salary, poured out over Jesus' head and feet (John 12:1-8). He knew the love in his own heart that would make him think of the safety of his friends even as he was being arrested saying, "If you seek me, then let these men go"

(John 18:8). He knew the love that would make him think of his mother's welfare even as he suffered on the cross (John 19:26-27), and the love that would cause him to pray for his killers, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

All of this was, of course, necessary in order for Jesus to be fully human, and to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves: to offer us the example of a perfect life; to offer God that perfect life as a sacrifice for our sin; to break the power of sin over human flesh; to find us in our brokenness and make us whole; to find us wherever we are lost and wandering, and lead us home. It was necessary to still the inner voice that cries, whenever our hearts are breaking, "Where is God? Why doesn't he do something? Doesn't he care?"

Lessons: However alone and abandoned we may at times be tempted to feel this next year, we have with us One who has known our loneliness and sense of abandonment. And he invites us to enter into his life, even as he entered into ours, and in union with him, to show those around us that same self-sacrificial love that moved him to come among us and redeem us, and that moves him still to make broken sinners like you and me his little brothers and sisters, children of the living God.

Conclusion

In the midst of pain and joy, God in Christ is before us, beckoning us further in and further on. Only by being open to the pain can we ever know life's joy. Only if we open ourselves to whatever life brings will it be said of us and of our children, as it was said of Jesus, "And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him" (2:40).

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